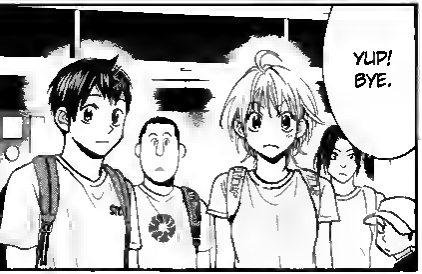
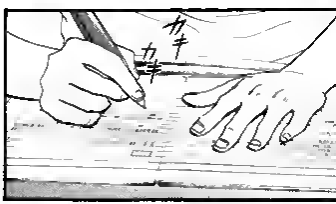


#156: A FRIEND'S FRIEND

I COULDN'T HAVE REACHED IT
IF I HADN'T DEFEATED IDE-KUN,
おめでとう!!

IT GOES TO SHOW HOW DIFFICULT IT IS TO GET INTO THE NATIONALS...

OKAY. I'M DONE.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EI-CHAN, ARE YOU THERE?
コンコン
!
SNORE
YUKICHI -KUN.... HUH...?
HE'S ALREADY FAST ASLEEP.
OH, NOTHING IN PARTICULAR.
AH! THERE YOU ARE.
NACCHAN, WHAT'S WRONG?
I WAS WONDERING WHAT YOU WERE DOING~

DID YOU CALL YOUR PARENTS ALREADY?
NOPE. I'LL DO IT LATER.
TODAY'S TOP STORY! HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT SUCCESSFULLY QUALIFYING FOR THE ALL-JAPAN JUNIOR,
MR. MARUO?
TEE-HEE-HEE
Sti

HUH?
WOAH, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!
IT'S A MOCK INTERVIEW.
HOW WAS IT, MR. MARUO?
UMMM... TODAY'S MATCH WAS SUCH AN IMPORTANT MATCH FOR MY PROFESSIONAL CAREER, SO I AM VERY GLAD I WAS ABLE TO WIN.
MR. IDE'S PLAYS WERE NOT ONLY UNPREDICTABLE, BUT ALSO EXTREMELY AGGRESSIVE, SO I WAS IN A VERY DIFFICULT SITUATION. BUT THE EXPERIENCE I GAINED FROM PLAYING AGAINST NACCHAN A FEW MONTHS AGO WAS EXTREMELY HELPFUL.
IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I PLAYED IN FRONT OF SO MANY PEOPLE, SO I WAS FEELING A LOT MORE PRESSURE THAN I EXPECTED.
LOOKING BACK, I THINK IT WAS A REALLY THRILLING AND CRUCIAL MOMENT OF MY LIFE.
ANYWAY, I WAS ABLE TO DO MY VERY BEST
AND WIN AGAINST AN EXTREMELY STRONG OPPONENT, SO IT WAS A GREAT MATCH.

IF POSSIBLE, I WANT TO GET STRONGER
AND PLAY SUCH A MATCH AGAIN
ON THE PROFESSIONAL STAGE.
.....
SOMETHING LIKE THIS...?
IT WAS SO PERFECT!
HEY!! WHY ARE YOU LAUGHING?!
S-SO RRY...
W-WASN'T IT TOO PLAIN?
NOPE. IT SOUNDED JUST LIKE EI-CHAN!

I DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT THAT, ACTUALLY.
OH, THE THING CALLED "THE IDEAL CONDITION"?
HAVE YOU EVER BEEN IN THE "ZONE", NAC-CHAN?
AH, CHANGE OF TOPICS, BUT
THERE ARE TIMES WHEN I PLAY UNBELIEVABLY WELL,
BUT I DON'T KNOW WHICH IS "ZONE" AND WHICH IS "RESULT OF HARD WORK"...
MAYBE IT'S TIMES WHEN I'M SO FOCUSED THAT I CAN'T QUITE HEAR THE CROWD EVEN THOUGH THERE'S A BIG AUDIENCE..
HMMM... I SEE.
SO IT'S SOMETHING EVEN PEOPLE AT NACCHAN'S LEVEL AREN'T SURE OF.
THAT'S RIGHT... NACCHAN'S MATCHES USUALLY HAVE ALMOST AS MANY SPECTATORS AS IDE-KUN'S...
SHE MUST HAVE EXPERIENCED MATCHES LIKE THAT PLENTY OF TIMES... SHE IS CUTE... AND STRONG, TOO....

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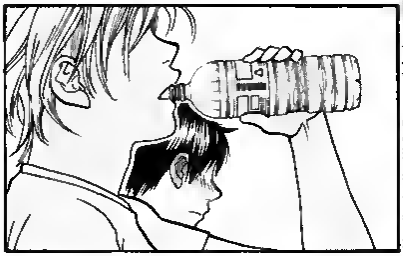
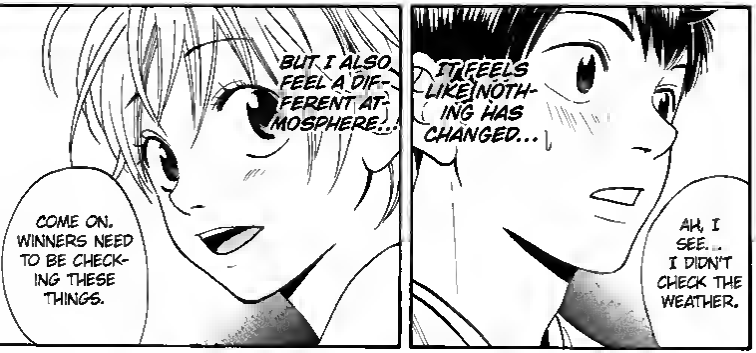
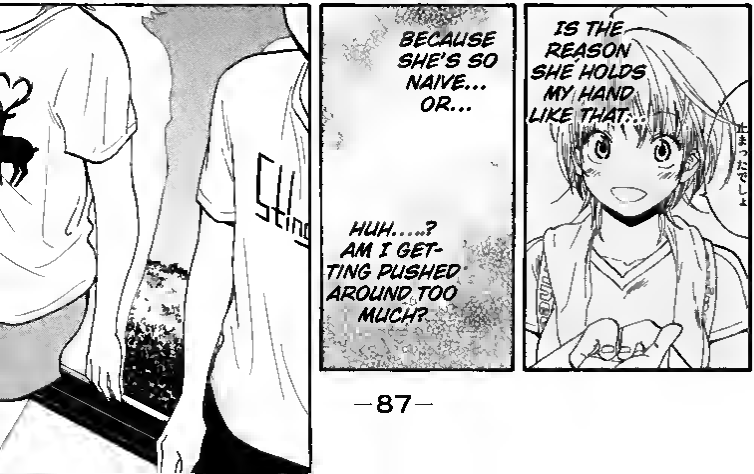


AND I'M GOING OUT WITH THAT VERY NAC-CHAN...

I-I WONDER IF TOMORROW WILL BE HOT, TOO.
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE GOING OUT?
HUH? THEY SAY IT'LL BE JUST LIKE TODAY.


IT FEELS LIKE NOTHING HAS CHANGED...
AH, I SEE... I DIDN'T CHECK THE WEATHER.
BUT I ALSO FEEL A DIFFERENT ATMOSPHERE...!
COME ON. WINNERS NEED TO BE CHECKING THESE THINGS.


IS THE REASON SHE HOLDS MY HAND LIKE THAT...
BECAUSE SHE'S SO NAIVE... OR...
HUH....? AM I GETTING PUSHED AROUND TOO MUCH?

NACCHAN'S HAND WAS SOOOO SOFT~
INSTINCT
THAT'S RIGHT. WE'RE GOING OUT, SO THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH IT!
GOO OOO OO!
INSTINCT
REASON
HEY, HEY! WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? THE ATMOSPHERE IS TOTALLY OFF!
REASON
WHAT ARE YOU SAYING! NO PROB-LEM! NO PROBLEM!
INSTINCT

COOL DOWN FOR A BIT!!
ゴッ
ドカッ
REASON
MY INSTINCT'S GOTTEN A BIT TOO STRONG THESE DAYS.
BUT IS IT A GOOD THING?
ゴホ
ゴホ
Are you okay?
ビクッ
HUH..? DID SHE NOTICE?!
C'MON, QUICK!
PUT YOUR HAND ON TOP, AND
Huh?!
TOP?
...HERE.

WE'D BETTER GO BACK TO OUR ROOMS NOW!
GOOD? OR BAD?
EH, UM MM... THAT WAS...
GO OO OO OO
LET'S
WE'LL DO OUR BEST TOMOR-ROW!!
KANTO JUNIOR TENNIS COMPETITION DAY-3

OKAY, FROM NOW ON, YOU ARE FIGHTING AGAINST TOP PLAYERS WHO EARNED THEIR SPOT IN THE ALL JAPAN JUNIOR.
THE RESULT OF TODAY'S MATCH WILL HAVE A HUGE EFFECT ON HOW WELL YOU DO AT ALL-JAPAN.
CONSIDER THIS THE BEGINNING OF THE ALL-JAPAN JUNIOR!!
DON'T FORGET THAT YOUR SEED POSITION WILL BE DECIDED BY THESE MATCHES!
YES, COACH!!

YUP!
I WANNA GO AS FAR AS I CAN THIS TIME!
I FEEL LIKE I CAN WIN IF I PLAY LIKE I DID YESTERDAY.
YUKICHI-KUN... YOU'RE SO PUMPED UP.
UWOOOOO
ハァハァ
ハァハァ
ハァハァ

....ALTHOUGH MY OPPONENT THIS TIME IS QUITE TOUGH.
YEAH, LET'S DO IT!
LET'S WIN TODAY AND MEET AT THE 4TH ROUND!

NABAE-KUN, MORNING.
OH, GOOD MORNING, MARUO-KUN.

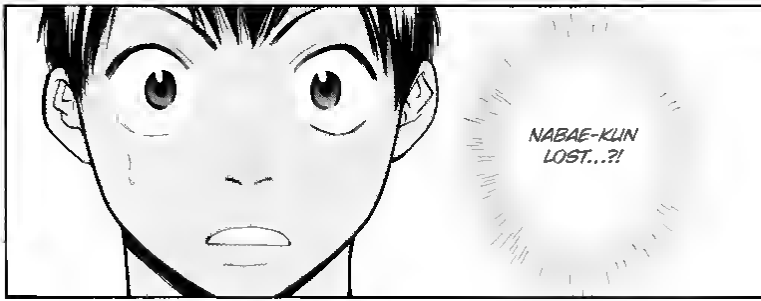
YOU DID GREAT YESTERDAY AGAINST IDE.
THANK YOU! I WAS ABLE TO CALM MYSELF DOWN AFTER NOTICING YOU WERE THERE.
AH... THAT'S RIGHT.
HE~Y, TAKAGI!
WHAT, NABAE.
THIS GUY'S IN THE SAME CLUB AS ME, TAKAGI SAKUYA.
HE'LL BE PLAYING FUKUZAWA-KUN TODAY,
AND THERE'S A CHANCE THAT MARUO-KUN WILL PLAY HIM IN THE 4TH ROUND, SO I WANTED TO INTRODUCE HIM.

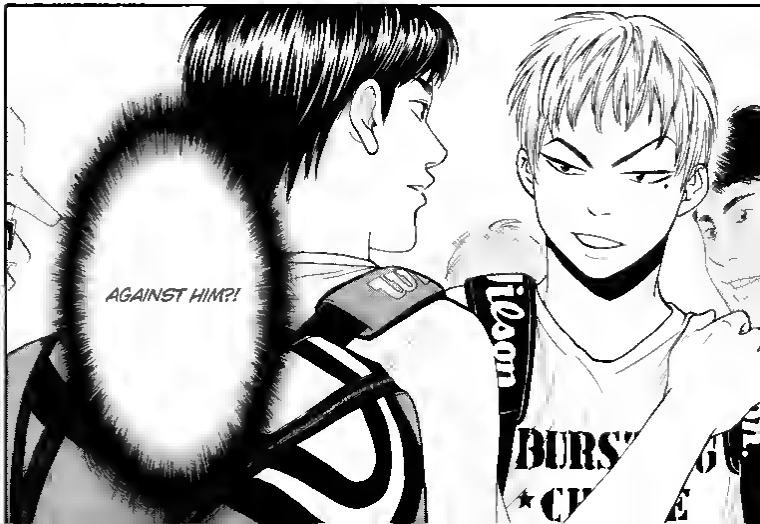
THIS GUY...
IS THE 4TH SEED, TAKAGI SAKUYA!
MARUO...
AHH...
IS THAT IT?
HUH?
...SO?
YUP, THAT'S IT.
BURSTING CHARGE

I KNOW THAT ALREADY.
THEN INTRODUCE YOURSELF.
UMM .. SORRY ABOUT THAT..
I GUESS .. THEY'RE GOOD FRIENDS?
I REALLY HATE THAT GUY CALLED TAKAGI.
LOOK AT HOW HE ACTED IN FRONT OF YOU JUST NOW.
EVEN IF HE DEFEATED NABAE ONCE...

APPARENTLY, TAKAGI DEFEATED NABAE ONCE IN A PRACTICE MATCH AT THEIR CLUB,
ALTHOUGH I DON'T KNOW THE EXACT DETAILS.

AH, YOU DIDN'T KNOW?
...HUH?


NABAE-KUN LOST...?!


AGAINST HIM?!

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Baby Steps

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